



PROLOGUE.

This romance of Freckles and the Angel of the Limberlost is one of the most novel, entertaining, wholesome and fascinating stories that have come from the pen of an American author in many years. The characters in this sylvan tale are:

- Freckles, a plucky waf who guards the Limberlost timber leases and dreams of angels.

The Swamp Angel, in whom Freckles' sweetest dream materializes.

McLean, a member of a lumber company, who befriends Freckles.

Mrs. Duncan, who gives mother love and a home to Freckles.

Duncan, head teamster of McLean's timber gang.

The Bird Woman, who is collecting camera studies of birds for a book.

Lord and Lady O'More, who come from Ireland in quest of a lost relative.

The Man of Affairs, brusque of manner, but big of heart.

Wessner, a timber thief who wants rascality made easy.

Black Jack, a villain to whom thought of repentance comes too late.

(Continued from last week's issue)

CHAPTER XVI.
FRECKLES RELEASED.

THE boss rode neck and neck with the angel. He glanced back and saw that Duncan was near. There was something terrifying in the look of the big man and the way he sat his beast and rode. It would be a sad day for the man on whom Duncan's wrath broke. There were four others close behind him and the pike filling up with the rest of the gang.

The angel turned into the trail to the west, and the men bunched and followed her. When she reached the entrance to Freckles' room there were four men with her and two more very close behind. She slid from the horse and, snatching the little revolver from her breast, darted for the bushes. McLean caught them back and, with drawn weapon, pressed up beside her. There they stopped in astonishment.

The Bird Woman blocked the entrance. Over a small limb lay her revolver, and it was trained at short range on Black Jack and Wessner, who stood with their hands above their heads.

Freckles, with blood streaming down his face from an ugly cut in his temple, was gagged and bound to the tree again, and the rest of the men were gone. Black Jack was raving like a maniac, and when they looked closer it was only the left arm that he raised. His right, with the hand shattered, hung helpless, and his revolver lay at Freckles' feet. Wessner's weapon was still in his belt, and beside him lay Freckles' club.

Freckles' face was of stony whiteness, with colorless lips, but in his eyes was the strength of undying courage. McLean pushed past the Bird Woman, crying, "Hold steady on them for just one minute more!"

He snatched the revolver from Wessner's belt and stooped for Jack's.

At that instant the angel rushed in. She tore the gag from Freckles, and, seizing the rope knotted on his chest, she tugged at it desperately. Under her fingers it gave way, and she hurried it to McLean. The men were crowding in, and Duncan seized Wessner. As the angel saw Freckles stand out free she reached her arms to him and pitched forward. A fearful oath burst from the lips of Black Jack. To have saved his life Freckles could not have avoided the glance of triumph he gave Jack as he folded his angel in his arms and stretched her on the mosses.

As McLean rose from blinding Wessner there was a cry that Jack was escaping. He was already well into the swamp, working for its densest part. Every man that could be spared plunged after him. Other members of the gang arriving, they were sent to follow the tracks of the wagons.

FRECKLES

By
Gene Stratton-
Porter

COPYRIGHT, 1904, BY DOUBLEDAY, PAGE & CO.

Watchers patrolled the line and roads through the swamp all that night with lighted torches, and the next day McLean headed as thorough a search as he felt could be made of one side, while Duncan covered the other, but Black Jack could not be found. Spies were set about his home in Wildcat hollow to ascertain if he reached there or aid was sent in any direction to him, but it was soon clear that his relatives were ignorant of his whereabouts and themselves searching for him.

Great is the elasticity of youth. A hot bath and a sound night's sleep renewed Freckles' strength. Freckles was on the trail early the next morning. Besides a crowd of people anxious to witness Jack's capture, he found four stalwart guards, one at each turn. In his heart he was compelled to admit that he was glad to have them there.

Near noon McLean turned his party over to join Duncan's and, taking Freckles, drove to town to see how it fared with the angel. McLean visited a greenhouse and bought an armload of its finest products, but Freckles would have none of them. He would carry his message in a glowing mass of the Limberlost's first goldenrod.

The angel was in no way seriously injured. She reached both hands to McLean. "What if one old tree is gone? You don't care, sir? You feel that Freckles has kept his trust as no body ever did before, don't you? You won't forget all those long first days of fright that you told us of, the fearful cold of winter, the rain, heat and loneliness and the brave days, and, lately, nights, too, and let me feel that his trust is broken?"

"Oh, Mr. McLean," she begged, "say something to him! Do something to make him feel that it isn't for nothing he has watched and suffered it out with that old Limberlost. Make him see how great and fine it is and how far, far better he has done than you or any of us expected! What's one old tree anyway?" she burst out passionately.

"I was thinking before you came. Those two other men were rank cowards. They were scared for their lives. If they were the drivers I wager you gloves against gloves they never took those logs out to the pike. My coming upset them. Before you feel had any more you go look and see if they didn't run out of courage the minute they left Wessner and Black Jack and dump that timber and go on the run. I don't believe they ever had the grit to drive out with it in daylight. Go see if they didn't figure on going out the way we did the other morning, and you'll find the logs before you strike the road. They never risked taking them into the open when they got away and had time to think. Of course they didn't!"

"And, then, another thing. You haven't lost your waver! It will never be claimed, because you made it with a stout, dark, red faced man that drives a bay and a gray. He was right back of you, Mr. McLean, when I came up to you yesterday. He went deathly white and shook on his feet when he saw those men would likely be caught. Some one of them was something to him, and you can just spot him for one of the men at the bottom of your troubles and urging those other younger fellows on to steal from you. I suppose he'd promised to divide. You settle with him, and that business will stop."

She turned to Freckles. "And you be the happiest man alive, because you have kept your trust. Go look where I tell you and you'll find the logs. I can just see about where they are. When they go up that steep little hill into the next woods after the cornfield why they could unloose the chains and the logs would roll off the wagons themselves. Now, you go see; and, Mr. McLean, you do feel that Freckles has been brave and faithful? You won't love him any the less even if you don't find the logs?"

The angel's nerve gave way and she burst into tears. Freckles couldn't bear it. He fairly ran from the room with the tears streaming from his own eyes. But McLean took the angel out of the Bird Woman's arms and kissed her brave little face.

As they drove back to the swamp McLean so earnestly seconded all that the angel had said that he soon had the boy feeling much better.

"Freckles, your angel has a spice of the devil in her, but she's superb. You needn't spend any time questioning or bewailing anything she does. Just worship blindly, my boy. By heaven, she's sense, courage and beauty for half a dozen girls!" said McLean.

"It's altogether right you are, sir," affirmed Freckles heartily. After a little he added, "There's no question but the series is over now."

"Don't think it," answered McLean. "The Bird Woman is working for success, and success along any line is not won by being scared out. She will be back on the usual day, and ten to one the angel will be with her. They are made of pretty stern stuff, and

they don't scare worth a cent. You may do your usual walking, but those four guards are there to stay. They are under your orders absolutely. I have listened to your pride too long. You are too precious to me to run any more risks."

"I am sorry to have anything spoil the series," said Freckles, "and I'd love them to be coming, the angel especial, but it can't be. You'll have to tell them so. You see, Jack would have been ready to stake his life she meant what she said and did to him. When the teams pulled out, Wessner seized me, and he and Jack went to quarrelling over whether they should finish me then or take me on to the next tree they were for felling. Wessner wanted to get at me right then, and Jack said he shouldn't be touching me till the last tree was out and all the rest of them gone. They tied me up again. To keep me courage up I twits Wessner about having to tie me and needing another man to help handle me. I told him what I'd do to him if I was free, and he grabs up me own club and lays open me head with it. When the blood came streaming, I set Jack raving, and he cursed Wessner for a coward and a softy. Then Wessner turned on Jack and gives it to him for letting the angel make a fool of him. Tells him she was just playing with him, and beyond all manner of doubt she'd gone for you, and there was nothing to do on account of his cursed foolishness but finish me, get out, and let the rest of the timber go, for likely you was on the way right then. And it drove Jack plumb crazy."

"I don't think he was for having a doubt of the angel before, but then he just raved. He grabbed out his gun and turned on Wessner. Sprang! It went out of his fist, and the order comes, 'Hands up!' Wessner reached for kingdom come like he was expecting to grab hold and pull himself up. Jack puts up what he has left. Then he leans over to me and tells me what he'll do to me if he ever gets out of there alive. Then, just like a snake hissing, he spits out what he'll do to her. I ain't done with him yet, and I've brought this awful thing on her."

"And I haven't begun with him yet," said McLean, setting his teeth. "I've been away too slow and too easy, believing there'd be no greater harm than the loss of a tree. I've sent for a couple of first class detectives. We will put them on his track, and rout him out and rid the country of him."

They entered the swamp, taking the route followed by the Bird Woman and the angel. They really did find the logs, almost where the angel had predicted they would be. McLean went on to the south camp and had an interview with Crown that completely convinced him that the angel was correct there also. But he had no proof, so all he could do was to discharge the man, though his guilt was so apparent that he himself offered to withdraw the wager.

Then McLean sent for a pack of bloodhounds and put them on the trail of Black Jack. They clung to it, on and on, into the depths of the swamp, leading their followers through what had been considered impassable and impenetrable ways, and, finally, around near to the west entrance and out into the swale. Here the dogs bellowed, raved and fell over each other in their excitement. They raced back and forth from swamp to swale, but follow the scent farther they would not, even though cruelly driven.

At last their owner attributed their actions to snakes, and, as they were very valuable dogs, gave over the effort to urge them on. So that all they really established was the fact that Black Jack had eluded their vigilance and crossed the trail some time in the night. He had escaped to the swale, from which he probably crossed the corduroy and, reaching the lower end of the swamp, had found friends.

For Freckles, with Jack's fearful oath ringing in his ears, there was neither rest nor peace. He was almost ill when he saw the Bird Woman and the angel coming down the corduroy. The guards of the east line he left at their customary places, but those of the west he brought over and placed one near Little Chicken's tree and the other at the carriage. He was firm about the angel's remaining in the carriage, which he did not offer to have unhitched. He went with the Bird Woman for the picture, which was the easiest matter it had been at any time yet, for the simple reason that the placing of the guards and the unusual movement about the swamp had made Mr. and Mrs. Chicken nervous, and they had not carried Little Chicken the customary amount of food. Freckles, in the anxiety of the last few days, had neglected him.

When the Bird Woman proposed to look for other subjects about the line Freckles went so far as to tell her that Jack had made fearful threats against the angel. He implored her to take the angel home and keep her under unceasing guard until Jack was located. He let her go, and then blamed himself fiercely that he had done so.

"McLean," said Mrs. Duncan, as the boss paused to greet her in passing the cabin, "do you know that Freckles has been in bed the last five nights and all he's eaten in that many days is a couple of pinto cups?"

"Why, what does the boy mean?" demanded McLean. "There's no necessity for his being on guard with the watch I've set on the line. I had no idea he was staying down there."

"He's no there," said Mrs. Duncan. "He goes somewhere else. He leaves on his wheel just after we're abed and rides in about cock crow or a little earlier, and he's looking like death and nothing short of it."



HERE THE DOGS BELLOWED, RAVED AND FELL OVER EACH OTHER.

"But, where does he go?" asked McLean in astonishment.

"I'm not given to hearing tales out of school," said Sarah Duncan, "but in this case I'd tell ye if I could. What the trouble is I dinna ken. If it is no stopped he's in for dreadful sickness, and I thought ye could find out and help him. He's in sair trouble; that's all I know."

McLean sat brooding as he stroked Nellie's neck.

At last he said: "I suspect I understand. At any rate, I think I can find out. Thank you for telling me."

"Ye'll no need telling once ye clap your eyes on him," prophesied Mrs. Duncan. "His face is all a glist' yellow and he's peaked as a starving caged bird."

CHAPTER XVII.
NURSING A HEARTACHE.

McLean rode down to the Limberlost and, stopping in the shade, sat waiting for Freckles.

Along the north line came Freckles, fairly staggering. When he turned east and reached Sleepy Snake creek, slid through the swale like the log black snake for which it was named, he sat down on the bridge and closed his burning eyes, but they would not stay shut. As if pulled by wires, the heavy lids drew open and the outraged nerves and muscles of his body danced, twitched and tingled.

He bent forward and idly watched the limpid little stream flowing beneath his feet. Stretching back into the swale, it came creeping between an impenetrable wall of magnificent wild flowers, vines and ferns. Milkweed, goldenrod, ironwort, fringed gentians, cardinal flowers and turtle head stood on the very edge of the creek, and every flower of them grew a double in the water. Wild clematis crowned with snow the heads of trees scattered here and there along the bank.

Freckles sat so still that presently the brim of his hat was covered with snake feeders, rasping their crisp wings and singing as they rested. Some of them settled on the club and one on his shoulder. He was so quiet and feathers, fur and gauze were so accustomed to him that all about the swale they went on with their daily life and forgot he was there.

The heron family waded about the mouth of the creek. Freckles idly wondered whether the nerve racking rasps they occasionally emitted indicated domestic felicity or a raging quarrel. A sheldrake, with flaring crest, went stalking across a bare space near the creek's mouth. A stately brown bittern waded out into the clear flowing water, lifting his feet high at every step and setting them down gingerly, as if he dreaded wetting them, and, with slightly parted beak, stood eagerly watching about him for worms. Behind him were some mighty trees of the swamp above, and below the bank gloved a solid wall of goldenrod.

No wonder the ancients had chosen yellow as the color to represent victory, for the fierce, conquering hue of the sun was in it. They had done well, too, in choosing purple as the color of royalty. It was a dignified, compelling color, and in its warm tone there was a hint of blood.

It was the Limberlost's hour to proclaim her sovereignty and triumph. Everywhere she flaunted her yellow banner and trailed the purple of her mantle, that was paler in the thistle heads, took on strength in the first opening asters, and glowed and burned in the ironwort.

Compellingly beautiful was the Limberlost, but cruelly withal: far back in there bleached the unconfined bones of her victims, and she had missed cradling him, oh, so narrowly!

Below the turtle log, a dripping silver gray head, with shining eyes, was cautiously lifted, and Freckles' hand slid around to his revolver. Higher and higher came the head; a long, heavy, fur coated body rose, now half, now three-fourths out of the water. Freckles looked at his shaking hand and doubted, but he gathered his forces, the shot rang out, and the otter lay still. He hurried down and tried to lift it. He could scarcely muster strength to carry it to the bridge. The consciousness that he really could not go farther with it made Freckles realize the fact that he was well up to the limit of human endurance. He could bear it little, if any, longer.

Every hour the face of the angel wavered before him, and behind it the awful distorted image of Black Jack, as he swore to the punishment he would mete out to her.

Freckles stopped when he came to the first guard, and telling him of his luck, asked him to go for the otter and carry it up to the cabin, as he was anxious to meet McLean. Freckles passed the second guard without seeing him, and hurried up to the boss. He stood silent under the eyes of McLean.

The boss was dumfounded. Mrs. Duncan had led him to expect that he would find Freckles in a bad way, but this was almost deathly. The fact was apparent that the boy scarcely knew what he was doing. His eyes had a glazed, farsighted look in them, that wrung the heart of the man that loved him. Without a thought of preliminaries McLean leaned in the saddle and drew Freckles up to him.

"My poor lad!" he said. "My poor, dear lad; tell me, and we will try to right it!"

Freckles had twisted his fingers in Nellie's mane. At the kind words his face dropped on McLean's thigh and he shook with a nervous chill. McLean gathered him closer and waited.

"Freckles," said McLean at last, "will you tell me, or must I set to work in the dark and try to find the trouble?"

"Oh, I want to tell you! I must tell you, sir," shuddered Freckles. "I cannot be bearing it the day out alone. I was coming to you when I remembered you would be here."

He lifted his face and gazed off across the swale, with his jaws set hard a minute, as if gathering his forces. Then he spoke.

"It's the angel, sir," he said.

Instinctively McLean's grip on him tightened.

"I tried hard the other day," said Freckles, "and I couldn't seem to make you see. It's only that there hasn't been an hour, waking or sleeping, since the day she parted the bushes and looked into me room, that the face of her hasn't been before me in all the tinnerness, beauty and mischief of it. She talked to me friendly like. She trusted me entirely to take right care of her. She helped me with things about me books. She traisted me like I was born a gentleman, and shared with me like I was of her own blood. She walked the streets of the town with me before her friends with all the pride of a queen. She forgot herself and didn't mind the Bird Woman, and run big risks to help me out that first day, sir. This last time she walked into that gang of murderers, took their leader and twisted him to the will of her. She outdone him and raced the life almost out of her trying to save me."

"Since I can remember, whatever the thing was that happened to me in the beginning has been me curse. I've been bitter, hard and smarting under it hopelessly. She came by and found me voice and put hope of life and success like other men into me in spite of it."

Freckles held up his maimed arm.

"Look at it, sir," he said. "A thousand times I've cursed it, hanging there helpless. She took it on the street, before all the people, just as if she didn't see that it was a thing to hide and shrink from. Again and again I've had the feeling with her, if I didn't entirely forget it, that she didn't see it was gone and I must pull her sleeve and be pointing it out to her. Her touch on it was so sacred like, at times since I've caught myself looking at the awful thing near like I was proud of it, sir. If I was born your son she couldn't be treating me more as her equal, and she can't help knowing you ain't truly me father. Nobody can know the ugliness or the ignorance of me better than I do and all me lack of birth, home, relatives and money and what's it all to her?"

Freckles stepped back from McLean, squared his shoulders and with a royal lift of his head looked straight into the boss's eyes.

"You saw her in the beautiful little room of her and you can't be forgetting how she begged and pleaded with you for me. She touched me body, and 'twas sanctified. She laid her lips on me brow, and 'twas sacrament. Nobody knows the height of her better than me. Nobody's studied my depths closer. There's no bridge for the great distance between us, sir, and, clearest of all, I'm for realizing it. But she risked terrible things when she came to me among that gang of thieves. She wore herself past bearing to save me from such an easy thing as death! Now, here's me, a man, a big, strong man, and letting her live under that fearful oath, so worse than any death 'twould be for her, and lifting not a finger to save her. I cannot bear it, sir. It's killing me by inches! If any evil comes to her through Black Jack it comes from her angel like goodness to me. Somewhere he's hiding! Somewhere he is waiting his chance! Somewhere he is reaching out for her! I tell you I cannot, I dare not be bearing it longer!"

"Freckles, be quiet!" said McLean, his eyes humid. "Believe me, I did not understand. I know the angel's father well. I will go to him at once. I have transacted business with him for the last three years. I will make him see I am only just beginning to realize your agony and the real danger there is for the angel. I will see that she is fully protected every hour of the day and night until Jack is located and disposed of. And I promise you further that if I fail to move her father or make him understand the danger I will maintain a guard over her until Jack is caught."

McLean slid from Nellie's back, and went to examine the otter.

"What do you want to do with it, Freckles?" asked McLean. "Do you know that it is very valuable?"

"I was for almost praying so, sir," said Freckles. "As I saw it coming up the bank I thought this: Once somewhere in a book there was a picture of a young girl, and she was just a breath like the beautifulness of the angel. Her hands were in a muff as big as her body, and I thought it was so pretty, I think she was some queen, or the like. Do you suppose I could have this skin tanned and made into such a muff as that—an enormous big one, sir?"

"Of course you can," said McLean. "That's a fine idea and it's easy enough. It would be a mighty fine thing for you to give to the angel as a little reminder of the Limberlost before it is despoiled, and as a souvenir of her trip for you."

Freckles lifted a face with a glow of happy color creeping into it and eyes lighting with a former brightness. Throwing his arms about McLean, he cried: "Oh, how I love you! Oh, I wish I could make you know how I love you!"

McLean strained him to his breast. "God bless you, Freckles," he said. "I do know! We're going to have some good old times out of this world together, and we can't begin too soon. Would you rather sleep first, or get a bite of lunch and have the drive with me, and then rest? I don't know but sleep will come sooner and deeper to take the ride and have your mind set at ease before you lie down. Suppose you go."

"Suppose I do," said Freckles, with a glimmer of the old light in his eyes and newly found strength to shoulder the otter. Together they turned into the swale.

McLean noticed and spoke of the big black chickens.

"They've been hanging round out there for several days past," said Freckles. "I'll tell you what I think it means. I think the old ratter has killed something too big for him to swallow, and he's keeping guard and won't let me chickens have it. I'm just sure, from the way the birds have acted out there all summer, that it is the ratter's den. You watch them now. See the way they dip and then rise, frightened like!"

Suddenly McLean turned on him with blanching face.

"Freckles!" he cried.

"You think it's Jack!" shuddered Freckles.

He dropped the otter, caught up his club, and plunged into the swale. Reaching for his revolver, McLean followed. The chickens circled higher at their coming, and the big snake

lifted his head and rattled angrily. It sank in sinuous coils at the report of McLean's revolver, and together he and Freckles stood beside Black Jack. His fate was evident and most horrible.

"Come," said the boss at last. "We don't dare touch him. We'll get a sheet from Mrs. Duncan and tuck over him, to keep these swarms of insects away, and set Hall on guard, while we go for the officers."

Freckles' lips closed resolutely. He deliberately thrust his club under Black Jack's body and, raising him, rested it on his knee. He pulled a long silver pin from the front of the dead man's shirt and sent it spinning out into the swale. Then he gathered up a few crumpled bright flowers and dropped them into the pool far away.

"My soul is sick with the horror of this thing," said McLean as he and Freckles drove toward town. "I can't understand how Jack dared risk creep-



HIS FATE WAS EVIDENT AND MOST HORRIBLE.

ing through the swale even in desperation. No one knew its dangers better than he. And why did he choose the rankest, muckiest place to cross the swamp?"

"Don't you think, sir, it was because it was on a line with the Limberlost south of the corduroy? The grass was tallest there, and he counted on those willows to screen him. Once he got among them he would have been safe to walk by stooping. If he'd made it past that place he'd been sure to get out."

(Continued next week.)

He acts twice who acts quickly. Never esteem anything as of advantage to thee that shall make thee break thy word or lose thy self-respect.—Marcus Aurelius. To sin no more is true repentance. Hold fast that which is good. The kingdom of God is within you.